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The ill-gotten library of 'Honest' Tom Martin 1697-1771

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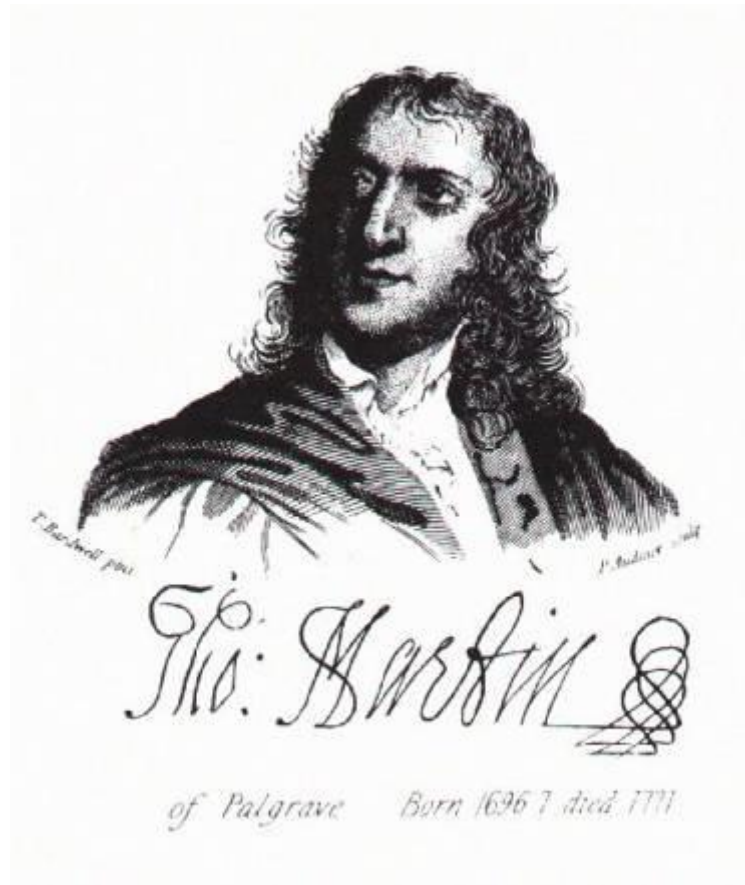
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The ill-gotten library of 'Honest Tom' Martin.

The name of Thomas Martin is occasionally to be found in accounts of English book collectors of the eighteenth century, although often only as a footnote or passing reference.^{[1](#)} Such references usually note his unusual sobriquet, 'Honest Tom', and record that for forty years he had custody of the valuable Le Neve collection of manuscripts. Comparatively little has been written about Martin's own collecting activities, or the extent to which he added to the Le Neve collection. It is not generally realised that for a decade from the early 1750s he possessed of one of the three or four most valuable private libraries in England. Yet by the early 1760s he had to sell-off parts of his library. Within a few years of his death in 1771 the remaining books and manuscripts had been so totally dispersed as to make it difficult now to have any conception of its richness. This paper will therefore consider Tom Martin and his library: its acquisition, administration, the uses to which it was put, and the fate that befell it. However, it is first necessary to describe the man himself, for he was far from being a typical antiquarian and book collector.

Tom Martin was a skilled and intelligent attorney who hated practising law. He rather devoted all his energies together with several small fortunes to his two passions - strong drink, and the collection of historical antiquities. He came from the part of Thetford in the county of Suffolk.^{[2](#)} He was born 8th March 1696/7, the son of a well-to-do clergyman.^{[3](#)} As a young man he hoped to go to Cambridge, where his family had connections with Caius College.^{[4](#)} However his father rather chose a career in his elder brother's legal practice in the town. About 1722 he married a wealthy young widow. The following year they moved to the Suffolk village of Palgrave (close to the Norfolk market town of Diss), where he remained until his death in 1771.

Two quotations from the antiquary William Cole, will serve to describe his character.

He is a blunt, rough, honest downright man; of no behaviour or guile: often drunk in a morning with strong beer, and for breakfast, when others had tea or coffee, he had beef steaks, or other strong meat. - His thirst after antiquities was as great as after liquors: the one injured his fortune, as the other did health.[5](#)

Similarly

Mr Martin has an house at Thetford also at Palgrave. I once spent a week with him. An attorney of good practice, & would be better, was he not too much given to drinking. However he is an honest man, & of a curious inquisitive turn in all matters relating to antiquity, which has rather injured his fortune as it is supposed. For tho' he had a good private fortune of his own, independent of his practice, which he made away with & was again set up by a very good estate which fell to him, yet such was his thirst after curiosities in the antiquary way, that it is supposed he has hurt himself again.[6](#)

Martin displayed many of the symptoms of an alcoholic, for according to Sir John Fenn,

When he began what he called a frolic, he would never give up whilst his money lasted, but would continue it for days and nights together, treating and carousing with porters, chairmen and persons of the lowest rank, to whom you might often find him (when surrounded in the porter cellar) telling stories and singing songs with every degree of humour suited to his company.

After an adventure of this kind he would *latterly* lie in bed for a considerable time, lament his imprudence, eat little, and drink only water.[7](#)

Martin's constitution must have been quite robust however, in spite of the damage he is supposed to have done to his health. At the age of sixty-five he still had

so great a pliancy of limbs that he could turn his foot so as to place a glass of liquor on the sole of it and drink it off.[8](#)

At the same time it could also be said of him that:-

As an antiquary, he was most skilful and indefatigable; and when he was employed as an attorney and genealogist, he was in his element.... He had the happiest use of his pen, copying, as well as tracing, with dispatch and exactness, the different writing of every aera, and tricking arms, seals, &c, with great neatness. His taste for antient lore seems to have possessed him from his earliest to his latest days. He dated all the scraps of paper on which he made his church notes, & c. Some of these begin as early as 1721, and end but the autumn before his death, when he still wrote an excellent hand; but he certainly began his collections even before the first mentioned period,...[9](#)

Among his papers are large numbers of facsimiles of charters, together with other documents, and drawings of coins or seals.[10](#)

Nearly all the surviving biographical accounts of Martin, and references to him in the correspondence of the leading antiquaries and historians of his day, remark upon his two apparently insatiable appetites. Curiously, in some way or other they will also frequently allude to his "honesty", in one way or another. To give an example, in 1737, the historian Francis Blomefield wrote to explain his non-appearance at a friend's house thus:-

At the time I design'd I set out with Honest Tom Martin in order for Darsingham but the weather proving bad & having the good fortune to load ourselves with antiquity before we reached Lynn, and my companion loosing 2 days there by loading himself with a stronger tho' not heavier burthen. I determined to return, & wait on you in the spring.[11](#)

This then was 'Honest' Tom Martin,[12](#) a "Squire Western" figure of the antiquarian world, who was yet renowned among the great historians of his time; a cherished member of the Society of Antiquaries for fifty three years.[13](#)

Although other examples of Martin's "frolics" are recorded by Fenn and Cullum, less detail is given about his literary pursuits, and in particular, his magpie-like obsession with collecting historical materials. These included not only printed and manuscript books, but documents of all kinds, prints, paintings, or any artefact with historical associations which his wife would allow in the house. His collection of coins and tokens was so renowned, that Francis Blomefield used it as an additional attraction when writing to invite his numismatist friends to visit him.[14](#) The sale of his property also included such varied items as an Indian tomahawk, various mediaeval weapons, Roman urns, lamps, spurs, horse bits, pieces of sculpture, a sword-fish, sea shells, fossils, petrifications, and an ostrich egg.[15](#)

It was an undirected fascination providing him with an enormous working knowledge of English antiquities and a reference library the envy of many contemporary historians. Yet at the same time it disabled him from any limited field of study. He never published anything in his lifetime, in spite of often claiming to "have several things upon the anvil which I have hopes of publishing"[16](#) In 1743 he boasted to John Tanner

As for my part (was it not for my family) I could be content to live almost on bread and water the remainder of my days, so I might have leisure to publish only some Fragmenta Antiquitatis, which I have amassed together, and an Appendix to Mr. Blomefield's History of Thetford, &c.[17](#)

However, the history of Thetford bearing his name was compiled on his behalf from the many notes he had collected on the subject but had never managed to write up.[18](#)

Even in his historical collecting, the rough and ready character of the man comes through, as is shown by the following excerpt from one of thousands of loose sheets that he added to his library, each containing pieces of information he considered worthy of record.

On Tuesday Morning [24th September 1751] came to the Crown in Swaffham
Wall the Spanish Ambassador Lord Anson
His Grace the Duke of Grafton Jeffries Esqr
Lord Euston his Grandson Southcoate Esqr
Lord De La Ware Furneis Esqr
Lord Leicester

They came from Euston Hall and were going to Lord Leicesters at Holkham. Lord Delaware had a wooden nose on such as the Buffoons use, which he put on and took off at pleasure. His Grace of G----n was observ'd to make water twice the short time they staid at Swaffham (to drink a dish of coffee, and change horses &c) in doing which office (the second time, under his chariot), several spectators (inter quo ipse sui) observ'd his p---- (for the size whereof he has been remarkably famous). It was short, but surprisingly thick, of a swarthy complexion, and look'd something like the end of a collar'd eel, before 'tis cut asunder.[19](#)

Background

Martin appears to have been a born antiquary, collector, and librarian. He was largely self taught, having had a sorely neglected education. For many years he was the only pupil at the Thetford free school, being left to read on his own.[20](#) Among his papers, there survives a notebook written in a youthful hand entitled "A catalogue of mine and my father's books which I use" later annotated "written when a school boy". It contains eighty four titles.[21](#) Otherwise his leisure time seems to have been spent in exploring the many ruins and other relics of the past in the town. As he commented in a letter lamenting his lot, "I'm sure there can be no worse town under the sun for breeding and conversation".[22](#)

About 1710 Thetford was visited by the elderly Peter Le Neve, Norroy King of Arms; first President of the revived Society of Antiquaries. He sought a guide to the many antiquities of the town only to be told that no-one knew more than thirteen-year old Master Martin.[23](#) The result was the growth of a close friendship between the learned old man and the teenage boy lasting until the death of the former. This served also to encourage the antiquarian leanings of the latter.

As a young man Martin soon became an avid purchaser of books and manuscripts for his private library. Many lists of such purchases made by Martin from London or provincial booksellers, book auctions, and private collectors dating from 1720 onwards survive in the Norfolk Record Office.[24](#) However his serious collecting seems to have coincided with his astute marriage and move to Palgrave two years later. The Suffolk Record Office holds a detailed personal account book by him for the period from 1726 to 1731, indicating in great detail how he spent every penny of his money.[25](#)

He also became interested in, and adept at, the organisation and classification of large documentary collections. At different times in his life he reorganised several, including his own. In fact the only lengthy period he spent away from his native Suffolk appears to have been during the Summer and Autumn of 1724 when he was paid thirty pounds by the authorities of Eton College for setting the muniment room in order and compiling a digest of many of the records there. The staff at Eton still value his work which is recorded by a wooden plaque in the library.[26](#)

Martin's Library

At its height, circa 1761 Martin's private library probably consisted of about 12,000 printed books, several thousand manuscript volumes. In addition it included many tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of unbound documents. During the intervening period he had brought up two large families, (he married twice within a decade; each of his wives bearing him eight

children about half of whom lived to adulthood). As a well-to-do young lawyer, with such family responsibilities, he might have built up a respectable library, but he would never have been able to amass a collection on this scale by legal means. The true origin of much of Martin's library lay not with the attorney himself, but rather his rich elderly friend Peter Le Neve. The irregular way in which Le Neve's manuscripts came into Martin's possession, (the circumstances of which were perhaps known to a least some of Martin's circle) makes his nickname seem something of a joke.

Peter Le Neve had intended to write the topographical history of Norfolk and had devoted the greater part of his life to collecting materials for the task. He spent years systematically searching for, and indexing, Norfolk references in the major series of Public Record. Also as Norroy King of Arms he also had access to the genealogical and heraldic manuscripts of the College of Arms. However, in spite of his enormous scholarship and capacity for study, he also, like his young friend Thomas Martin, had a temperament unsuited to write a historical narrative. Le Neve published nothing during his lifetime. His obsessional gathering of as much material as possible meant that at the time of his death in 1729 he had built up an enormous collection of manuscripts. Richard Gough later described it as "the greatest fund of antiquities for his native county that ever was collected for any single one in the kingdom".²⁷ It was this accumulation which fell into Martin's hands.

Le Neve's Norfolk (and to a lesser extent Suffolk) collections fell into three broad categories.²⁸ He had many original historical documents such as cartularies, feodaries, manorial court rolls etc. Secondly he had created a series of calendars and indexes to Norfolk and Suffolk references in the Public Records, and College of Arms. Finally there was a truly massive jumble of miscellaneous information on tiny slips or scraps of paper, compiled from a vast array of sources by many different hands, and thousands of other loose papers. These were all organised in a crude topographical order.

Many of these slips had been written by Le Neve or his amanuensis, or one of the circle of "Icenian" antiquaries with whom he corresponded and regularly exchanged notes. (This group included men such as John Kirkpatrick, Benjamin Mackerell, Thomas Tanner and Thomas Martin).²⁹ Many, however consisted of the dissected notes of earlier antiquaries and similarly mutilated documents such as letters and accounts. Thus several historical collections by others (acquired by Le Neve during his lifetime) had been cut up for this crude filing system, making their origins impossible to trace.

Le Neve was a rich, but a cantankerous and eccentric man who whilst in his seventies had married a young and strong-willed wife. He frequently changed his mind about his will, particularly concerning his extensive library of printed books and manuscripts. At one time he intended to leave them all to the College of Arms, but subsequently he changed his mind. As a result he left an imperfect will, which caused a long and expensive legal contest over the subsequent ownership of his estates. However, indisputably Le Neve eventually intended his vast manuscripts relating to Norfolk and Suffolk to be available for public use. They were to be deposited within a year of his death, in a suitable repository either in Norwich Cathedral or some other public building in the city.³⁰ To that end he appointed as Executors for this task his friends Thomas Tanner the Chancellor of the Diocese, and Thomas Martin. The will indicated that instructions for the disposal of the remainder of his literary and historical materials would be found in a note to be left in his writing desk prior to his decease.

The various Le Neve collections were however so extensive and ill-defined that Tom Martin, Thomas Tanner, and the young wife Frances Le Neve, could not agree exactly what was included in each collection. They shelved the problem pending the disposal of the printed books. Le Neve's note indicated that they were to be left to a distant relative in London, who promptly arranged to sell them by auction during the winter of 1730/1. Martin was one of the principal purchasers at this sale.[31](#)

Before and after the auction, Tom Martin was in his element. He spent many hours at his late friend's house in Great Witchingham, listing, examining and sorting the various manuscript collections, in much the same way as he had done at Eton College. However by the autumn of 1731 (two years after Le Neve's death) the executors had still taken no action regarding the Norfolk and Suffolk manuscripts. Within a few months however this situation changed radically. In November Thomas Martin's first wife, Sarah, died soon after giving birth to twins, leaving him the care of eight young children. In December, Tanner heard he had been elevated to the see of St Asaph. He had quickly to wind up his affairs in Norfolk prior to his consecration at Lambeth on 23 January 1732: thereafter he never had the opportunity to return to his adopted county. In the same month of January the marriage of Thomas Martin and Frances Le Neve not only solved the domestic problems of the former but had the added virtue of temporarily resolving the custody of the Norfolk and Suffolk manuscripts.[32](#)

After a short period the couple moved to Martin's house at Palgrave, taking with them the enormous manuscript collections destined for public use in Norwich; ostensibly until the question of their future custody could be resolved. Bishop Tanner was far from happy about the irregular way in which Martin and his wife had taken the manuscripts to Palgrave. However he could not do anything, unless he was willing to risk the cost of a Chancery suit against his co-executor, for the sake of a Diocese he had now left. In any event, other more valuable parts of Le Neve's considerable estate were already the subject of a costly lawsuit which eventually went to the House of Lords.

More than once Tanner wrote to Martin requesting that they should meet in London to discuss the matter.[33](#) Martin implied he would soon talk his wife into accepting Tanner's interpretation of the will.[34](#) However, partly as a result of the bishop's subsequent ill-health, Martin succeeded in delaying and ultimately avoiding any such meeting. Tanner's conscience was eased a little after 1733. He discovered that Martin was making the materials freely available to Francis Blomefield who had advertised the first of three topographical histories of East Anglian counties based upon them.[35](#) However Tanner was never completely reconciled to the situation up to his death in 1735. One side effect of Martin's conduct was that the Bishop subsequently left all his manuscripts to the Bodleian Library rather than to Norwich Cathedral, much to the dismay and disgust of the Norfolk antiquarian community.[36](#)

In the introduction to the first volume of his history, Blomefield gratefully acknowledged Martin's help, both in providing material from his own collections, and also making available to him those of Le Neve, "they resting in his hands until they be properly disposed of according to Mr. Le Neve's will".[37](#) However, with no individual having any claim on the ownership, they were gradually amalgamated into Martin's own library and all thought of their being housed in a public repository was soon forgotten. This had clearly been Martin's intention, and indeed, within three years of their move to Palgrave, Blomefield was assisting him dispose of a few choice items to private collectors.[38](#) It is not possible to say whether or not the nature of Martin's conduct was widely known among his contemporaries, although

clearly at least some of the men who referred to him as "Honest Tom" were aware of his malversation.

Further Acquisitions

However, at the same time, and throughout the next twenty five to thirty years Martin was constantly adding to his collection by purchase and by other means. For as he said in a letter to Andrew Ducarel of December 1757.

My numerous family and small income oblige me to be as frugal as possible; but wholly to abridge myself from buying some few books in the study I so much delight in, would be worse than imprisonment, or death itself.[39](#)

One might however question whether or not the amassing of more than 10,000 printed books over a forty year period can fairly be described as "buying some few books".

Most of Martin's additions were of printed books, and in all learned subjects, although the emphasis was on British history. The sale catalogue of his printed books does however also contain substantial numbers of books in French, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, Saxon, Arabic and Hebrew.[40](#) In addition there were nearly 800 works described as "Black letter books" including significant numbers of British and European incunabula. In particular the early works of de Worde and Pynson's presses are well represented. It was from these books and other collections that Martin was able to provide additional material for both Joseph Ames and William Herbert for respective their editions of the *Typographical antiquities*.[41](#)

He was however always ready to purchase manuscript collections or individual documents. One major acquisition was the purchase (possibly from Blomefield's widow) of the "innumerable letters of good consequence in history", which her husband had borrowed from the executors of the last Earl of Yarmouth,[42](#) and apparently never returned. These are, of course, now known to scholars as "the Paston Letters". Another major manuscript acquired from Blomefield, although one which neither man recognised, was the earliest surviving manuscript of Sir Philip Sydney's *Defence of poetry*, bound up with others in a volume entitled *Liber Miscellan*.[43](#)

Martin also continued to add large numbers of drawings, transcripts, letters and other loose papers to Le Neve's collections of these, as did Francis Blomefield during the periods he was using them. The majority were topographical or genealogical, although other packages contained notes of early printed books, and political, satirical and other verses. This last contains some examples of Martin's own poetry, including one poem in praise of drinking.[44](#) Also there is a most interesting short poem on the nature of intellectual freedom, transcribed from the "bog wall" of one of the Inns of Court, although this may have been the work of Le Neve.

Martin was a regular participant in auctions in Norwich and elsewhere in East Anglia,[45](#) and regularly made purchases from booksellers in town and country.[46](#) He was also clearly attracted to the newly widowed. His surviving papers show how he made extensive purchases not only from the surviving relicts of gentlemen collectors, such as Elizabeth Blomefield. He also made substantial purchases from the widows of deceased booksellers such as the Widow of David Samuel of Kings Lynn, or of Mrs Barber of Thetford.[47](#) However it should not be assumed that his contact with the bereaved was always purely for mercenary advantage.

Martin seems to have spent months sorting Francis Blomefield's papers which "were delivered to me in such wretched confusion that my pains have been unaccountable in sorting them out".[48](#) Over the next decade he also went to considerable trouble to assist her in disposing of the stocks of her husband's printed history.[49](#)

By 1753 Martin's reputation as a collector was such, that his advice was sought by a certain Edward Holden over the disposal of "a curious collection of pamphlets & manuscripts".[50](#) They were described as "the tedious labours of twenty years during the troublesome times of King Charles, containing many transactions as yet secret to the world". As Holden wrote "I know well your taste and love of antiquity & curiosities and therefore pray you'll maturely consider how best and to whom an offer of such a fine collection shou'd be made". Unfortunately Martin's reply has not been preserved, but given the ultimate fate of most of his library, perhaps it is as well that he did not have the resources to purchase the Thomason Tracts.

Administration of Library

Tom Martin, when sober, was an orderly man who loved arranging and classifying historical documents, who meticulously recorded all his book purchases. He also compiled many lists and catalogues of the different parts of his collections, such as "Books in my library which relate to the antiquities and other curiosities of the city of Rome"[51](#) etc. etc.. If there was any complete catalogue however, it does not appear to have survived, although much of the collection can be pieced together from the five surviving sale catalogues compiled after his death.[52](#)

Unfortunately he has left little evidence as to how he arranged his library, other than that there must have been book cases throughout the house and those in his study contained his most prized possessions. There is however a classification scheme for his substantial print collection, entitled "The manner how my prints are plac'd in the Dining Room".[53](#) This was an alphabetical system:-

- A Antiques
- B Scripture
- C Beasts, Birds
- D Landskips
- E Battles, Sieges
- F Foreign Buildings
- G Seals, Arms, Pedigrees, Foreign
- H Conversations, Still life
- I Hawking, Hunting, sports
- K Parliaments, Coronations, Funeralls
- L General Maps
- M Monies, Coins, Medals
- N Deeds, Seals
- O Deeds, Seals, Heads
- P British Arms
- Q Knights of the Garter
- R Miscellaneous.

Then there was a gap in the scheme until:

X Prints promiscuous (to be sorted)
Y Duplicates to be exchange'd or sold
Z Miscellaneous original drawings.

There are also many records of his dealings with his bookbinders, in particular Samuel Harper. He was a countryman from the nearby village of Syleham, who appears to have trudged round the neighbourhood collecting twenty odd books at a time and returning them later. Martin used Harper's services for more than a decade and meticulously recorded every book as it was sent, and when it was returned.⁵⁴ He also recorded his purchases of binding materials, some of which survive. For example in March 1742/3 he asked the local carriers to purchase six rough calf and three pair sheep skins from Charles and Daniel Franklin, Leathersellers in Butchers Row Temple Bar, which cost him seven shillings and three shillings respectively. At the same time he ordered six quire of Marble paper from Thomas Dowson, for seven shillings and six pence.⁵⁵

Exploitation

The picture painted hitherto, of an orderly, but rather disreputable (if not dishonest) man does not explain the considerable affection and admiration in which he was held by two generations of English antiquaries. It does not explain why men such as Sir John Fenn the editor of the Paston Letters, Sir John Cullum, Baronet, John Ives - the Suffolk Herald, and the topographer Richard Gough should go to considerable trouble and expense to perpetuate his memory.⁵⁶ The answer may be because Martin would always make available the resources of his library, and give unstintingly of his time to anyone interested in historical research. In a period when scholars outside London and the universities rarely had access to the materials they needed, correspondence with Martin could be a considerable asset.

Although he cannot be described as a historian, Martin's influence on contemporary historical writing was nevertheless considerable. His massive library was not the idle hobby of a rich man but was put to good use in assisting others. The following contains the names of a few of the antiquaries, historians, and numismatists of national repute whom Martin is known to have assisted. Browne Willis, Thomas Gale, William Cole, Andrew Ducarel, Sir Andrew Fountain, Joseph Ames, William Herbert, George Vertue, Richard Rawlinson, William Stukeley, Philip Carteret Webb, and Edward Rowe Mores.⁵⁷ Martin's correspondence with Andrew Ducarel also indicates that in 1755 and 1756 he went to considerable trouble to track down and retrieve some manuscripts on behalf of a Mr Franks of Pontefract. In particular he endeavoured to retrieve some valuable drawings that had been "stuck upon the walls of a parson's necessary house"⁵⁸

Thus a good many of the books in the library were donations by their grateful authors. John Tanner when sending a copy of his revision of his brother's *Notitia Monastica*, desired Martin "should not speak of it lest every one whom he had any little assistance from should expect the same".⁵⁹

However it was in his native East Anglia where Martin's had the most noticeable influence on contemporary historiography. Tom Martin appears to have persuaded his neighbour Francis Blomefield to undertake the massive history of Norfolk based upon Le Neve's materials and provided him with every opportunity and assistance to use them. When Blomefield died in 1752, only part of the way through the job, it was Martin who went to considerable further trouble to persuade Charles Parkin to complete the work. Parkin also died before the history

was published, and once again it appears to have been Martin who took pains to persuade the Kings Lynn bookseller William Whittingham to risk publishing the work.[60](#) Similarly Martin was active in assisting Henry Swinden to compile his history of Great Yarmouth, and earlier he corresponded with Benjamin Mackerell the historian of Kings Lynn and Norwich.[61](#) Towards the end of his life he assisted and corresponded with Philip Morant the historian of Essex, James Bentham the historian of Ely Cathedral, and Sir Joseph Ayloffe the would-be historian of Suffolk.[62](#)

Martin's library also appears to have been regarded as something of a tourist attraction among the learned who happened to be visiting East Anglia. The engraver and antiquary George Vertue has left an account of one such brief visit in 1739.

From thence wee went to see Thom: Martin at Palgrave brother Antiquary - who entertained us with much Friendly civility. his Collections are very curious and valuable his pictures &c. Armes grants Chartularies Mss. of many kinds great collections towards the History of Suffolk & Norfolk. some rare old printed books. this collection & his own collections of Notes & remarkable deeds is very numerous. and would require much time to consider well. all the time wee had there that evening & next morning was fully employd, to see and cursorily observe what was possible in our short stay.[63](#)

Similarly, in 1734, Francis Blomefield had used the comparative proximity of Martin's coin collection, as an added inducement when seeking to persuade his friend Beaupre Bell to come and visit him.[64](#)

The fate of the library

Martin ought not to have been a poor man. He had a reasonable inheritance, his income as an attorney, the considerable assets brought by each of his wives, and later legacies from his brother. Yet he did not have the financial resources to maintain his chosen style of living. As Sir John Cullum described it:

Mr. Martin's desire was not only to be esteemed, but to be known and distinguished by the name of Honest Tom Martin of Palgrave, an ambition in which his acquaintance saw no reason not to gratify him. ... Had he desired the appellation of wise and prudent, his inattention to his business, his contempt and improper use of money, and his fondness for mixed and festive company, would have debarred him, as the father of a numerous family, of that pretension. He died poor, having been little attentive to frugality and sobriety; but left behind him the character of an honest man.[65](#)

By 1762 his profligate life-style, and obsessional book-collecting eventually caught up with him. In April of that year Andrew Ducarel the librarian at Lambeth Palace received a sorry account from his friend in Palgrave blaming everybody else for his troubles except their true author.

My eldest son has married very imprudently; that daughter .. now is, and for two years, past has been, confined, through a high disorder in her senses, without any present symptoms of ever recovering. My second son (whom I had bound out to a Surgeon and Apothecary) enlisted for a common soldier.

Others in my family, either afflicted with sickness, or not behaving with that dutifulness, as to be any company in my old age. &c. &c. And, to complete my calamities fortune has seemed for a long while past to frown upon me. Pardon me, my dear friend, for troubling you with this ungrateful detail of my misfortune, but, in short, they have brought me under a necessity of parting with my large and expensive Collection of Books, Deeds, Coins, and various other Curiosities, in my life-time. Nor do I repine at it, as I have no child who understands any thing about them. The great hardship is the present scarcity of money, and want of friends to advise and direct me in what method to dispose of them to the best advantage. Sometimes I am thinking of finding out some Nobleman or Gentleman who would purchase them all together; sometimes of offering the most choice of them to the British Museum; and at other times of exposing them to a public sale or auction in town.[66](#)

This letter marks the beginning of the end of the collection. Ducarel replied giving his advice and commiseration:-

Drs Commons May 4 1762

My good friend

I received your kind letter of the 25th April on Friday last - It has given me an infinite concern; & the series of Misfortunes which seem at once, to overwhelm you, will I hope, thro' gods blessing, daily decrease; & to enjoy a good state of health, at this particular time, is a peculiar Happiness from Heaven - As I have no connexions in Suffolk all you mentioned was entirely new to me & as to your daughter, who lived in London, I had neither seen nor heard any thing about her for upwards of two years-

The best advice I can give you, you are welcome to - & since you are now under a necessity of parting with your large & expensive collection, the business is, to do it in the most advantageous manner - For that purpose I have this day consulted with our old friend Dr Birch - & we both agree first that the best way will be to dispose of the whole collection by auction & recommend Baker the Bookseller as the properest person to be employed in the management thereof.

As to ye Books - We *both* agree 2dly that Baker is the fittest person to make a Catalogue of them & the Mss. & to dispose them properly.

3dly As to ye old deeds Chartae &c &c &c we both agree that Baker is not a proper person to make a Catalogue of them - but that your self should draw up a list or account of them, Which you can easily do; as, we apprehend, they are digested according to their counties -

4thly We both agree that we do not know any nobleman or Gentleman now in this kingdom who would purchase the whole collection of chartae &c together - & that even if such a Nobleman could be found it would be almost impossible to find persons, properly qualified, to set a true value & Estimation of them between the buyer & the seller.

5thly We both agree that if these are put up to auction, in parcells according to the Counties, they will fetch a much greater price by that means than by any other.

6thly We both agree that the list or Catalogue of the old Deeds & c should be published a month, at least, before the Auction begins that Gentlemen might be apprized, in time, of what they are.

7thly We both think it not improbable that Baker will advance money upon the Collection; when in his hands but that he will confine himself to the Books & Mss only, as to the Loan of money...[67](#)

The bookseller referred to is, of course, Samuel Baker of York Street, the original founder of Sotheby's, and who specialised in Antiquarian book auctions.

Ducarel also undertook to approach the Archbishop to see whether he would be prepared to buy any of his friend's manuscripts relating to the see of Canterbury. However, when it came to it Martin simply could not bring himself to sell more books than he needed to meet his immediate debts. The next nine years therefore saw a gradual selling of books and manuscripts as creditors became so pressing that they could no longer be ignored. However he hated parting with any book, describing it as "driving the first nail in his coffin".[68](#) He listed several hundred books in a document which he later endorsed "These I once intended to have parted with but now have taken those with this mark into my study."[69](#) Over half of the books have been so marked.

1763 saw the sale of the valuable collection of gold and silver medals to Lord Maynard.[70](#) By 1768 his situation was again so bad that he was forced to invite the London bookseller Thomas Payne to visit Palgrave and make him an offer for whatever books he would. (This bookseller was incidentally described by John Nichols as "Honest Tom Payne".[71](#)) John Fenn has a pathetic account of this period:

Whilst Mr Payne was examining his library and picking out such books as he thought proper, Mr Martin would never come near him, though often in a morning early, whilst every one else was in bed, he would get up, go down into his library, take away and hide up such old curious books as he most valued. Many of these were found after his death hidden in various parts of the house.[72](#)

Epilogue

Martin died in March 1771 a sorely disappointed man. Almost to the end he would always assist anyone who applied to him for information from his library, even though he could see he would not live to see the results of such labours in print.[73](#) Not surprisingly, his widow had no great attachment to the books and manuscripts which had dominated her life through two marriages and ensured their old age was lived in poverty. She immediately let it be known that she was going to dispose of the collection largely for the benefit of her husband's creditors. Over the few months she sold many of the most choice items to antiquarian friends of her husband such as John Fenn and John Ives and other private collectors. It was probably at this time that John Fenn acquired the Paston letters, which he later published.

The complete dispersion of the Martin's remaining library took place over the next seven or eight years, in such a way as if destiny were conspiring to remove all traces of this illegitimate collection as quickly as possible.⁷⁴ The bookseller William Whittingham of King's Lynn, who had collaborated with Martin in the publication of the remaining parts of Blomefield's *History* was called in to make an overall appraisal of the remaining collections.⁷⁵ These were then sold

John Worth, to a Diss Chemist, and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, for £660: a fraction of their true value. Worth quickly auctioned off the pictures, prints, ancient weapons etc. in Diss. He also sold many manuscripts directly to John Ives. Then in 1773 the printed books were sold en masse to the Norwich booksellers Booth and Berry for £330. They in turn sold large numbers by weight in Diss and then removed about 6,000 to Norwich, where they were disposed of in a marked catalogue priced at more than £2,000. Most of the remaining manuscripts were auctioned by what had become the firm of Baker and Leigh in London, in April 1773, and May 1774 and raised a further £450.

John Worth also intended to publish Martin's long expected account of Thetford. He advertised the work, commissioned some engravings and a few sheets were printed in Norwich. However shortly afterwards, in December 1774, he too died insolvent.⁷⁶ All that remained of Martin's collections was then purchased by Mr. Hunt, bookseller, at Harleston, who incorporated them into a marked catalogue, and sold the rest to private purchasers.⁷⁷ The dispersion was completed premature death of John Ives's and the dispersal of his collection in London, in March 1777. All that remained of the collection at the end was the many bundles of loose papers originally been compiled by Le Neve, which eventually Sir John Fenn agreed to take, merely to save them from destruction. Most of them now exist in the Norfolk Record Office, and although they are a gold mine for seventeenth and eighteenth century history, but a nightmare to use.⁷⁸

Martin's friends did not forget him however.

According to Fenn, Tom Martin was:-

A friendly and cheerful neighbour, and when sober, an instructive and entertaining companion; and would he have paid that attention to his profession that his abilities enabled him to do, and which circumstances and children required he should do, he might have possessed such a fortune as would have entitled him both to have pursued his favourite amusements with comfort and satisfaction, and to have provided for his family; but being always distressed, his mind was uneasy, and he too often sought relief from low company.⁷⁹

Dibdin's assessment was

Martin's book pursuits were miscellaneous, and perhaps a little too wildly followed up;; yet some good fortune contributed to furnish his collection with volumes of singular curiosity.⁸⁰

Much of Ives' *Pastoral elegy* is rather amateurish, and not worth preserving, although four verses do perhaps contribute to the picture of the man.

Strephon
Antiquity in him her Champion lost;
Of all her votaries few with him compared:
Her relicts purchased at the dearest cost:
Others with him the curious pleasure shared.

Damon
With fixt contempt he viewed the gilded Ore,
Which holds so many thousands in its chains:
Few will in search of knowledge make them poor
We'll hope the pleasure paid him for his pains.

Strephon
And sure it did for goodness ruled his heart;
Complacency was seated in his breast;
Honor and Probity, held each a part.
And Honesty composed his Soul to rest.

Damon
His lively sallies shewed a chearfull mind -
On goodness chearfullness will sure attend:
Yet did his Wit oft leave a sting behind
For not exempt from faults was this our Friend.

The closing verse would also make an appropriate epitaph, to this singular, if misguided book collector.

Strephon
Oh! Sight of woe! - sad, sable, awfull, slow:
Grim Death, thy power disown, what mortal can?
The victim thou has summon'd, Tyrant know,
Now sleeps at peace - he was - *an Honest Man*.

David Stoker

October 1990

Footnotes

[1](#). Thomas F. Dibdin, *Bibliomania*, (London:Chatto & Windus, 1876) 384. William Younger Fletcher, *English book collectors*, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1902) 148. and Seymour De Ricci, *English collectors of books & manuscripts, (1530-1930) and their marks of ownership*, (Cambridge University Press, 1930), 65, 68.

[2](#). The best sources for Martin's early life are the account taken from his own notes in his *History of Thetford* ed. R. Gough (London: J. Nichols, 1779), 284-5 and the memoir of Martin by Sir John Cullum which was prefixed to this work (xi-xviii). In addition Sir John Fenn prepared 'Memoirs of the life of Thomas Martin, Gent.,' which were read to the Society of Antiquaries on 23rd November 1780, and which he subsequently enlarged in 1784. These were not however published until 1904 (*Norfolk Archaeology*, XV. (1904) 233-48). There are also accounts of Martin in *D.N.B.*, and John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 9 vols (London: J. Nichols, 1812-15), V. 384 et seq., but these are derived from the earlier sources.

[3](#). His father was William Martin, rector of Great Livermore and Curate of St Mary's Thetford.

[4](#). His mother was Elizabeth Burrough, aunt of Sir James Burrough, subsequently master of Caius College.

[5](#). British Library Addl MS. 5876 f.88.

[6](#). B.L. Addl MS. 5833 f.166

[7](#). Fenn, *Memoirs*, 246.

[8](#). Fenn, *Memoirs*, 241.

[9](#). Cullum (see note 2).

[10](#). For example, Norfolk Record Office, Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society Deposit, NNAS c3/2/5 contains large numbers of Martin's transcripts and facsimiles of Elizabethan deeds. Martin's papers are now widely dispersed among manuscript collections, although the majority of Martin's are in the Norfolk Record Office. The two main sources are the Frere Manuscripts, and the Norfolk & Norwich Archaeological Society Deposit (both collections are largely uncatalogued). Other materials are to be found in the Duleep Singh Deposit, Castle Museum Deposit, and Colman Manuscripts. There are also surviving manuscripts in the Suffolk Record Office, the British Library, among the Gough Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Arundel Castle and also probably in collections overseas.

[11](#). Letter to Samuel Kerrich, rector of Dersingham 13 December 1737 (N.R.O. NNAS c3/1/9 fo.20).

[12](#). The origin of Martin's sobriquet is discussed by Fenn (246), and is said to date from its mysterious appearance on the subscription list for Grey's *Hudibras* in 1744. However it is clear from the previous reference that its use predates this by at least seven years.

[13](#). He was admitted Fellow in 1718 on the recommendation of Peter Le Neve, President of the Society. He also later became a member of the Gentleman's Society of Spalding.

[14](#). Letter to Beaupre Bell 27 December 1734 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 f.28).

[15](#). Many of these are listed in Thomas Worth's *A catalogue of the entire collection prints, coins, &c &c. Of the late Mr Martin F.A.S. which will be sold by Auction at the King's-Head of Diss Norfolk on Thursday the 29th and Friday the 30th and Saturday the 31st October and Monday the 2nd November 1772* ([London?], 1772)

[16](#). Letter to Andrew Ducarel 25 May 1762. N.R.O. NNAS C.3/1/5.

[17](#). Letter to John Tanner July 27, 1743, in Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 413. Blomefield noted in his *A History of the Ancient City and Burgh of Thetford*, (Fersfield, 1739) that a fuller account was expected from his friend Thomas Martin.

[18](#). John Fenn wrote to Richard Gough in 1777 "The Thetford History was compiled from Mr. Martin's papers, in Mr Worth's possession, by a Mr Davis dissenting minister, who lived at Diss". However according to Richard Gough's preface to the work, he "bought the manuscript, with the undigested materials, copy-right, and plates. The first of these required a general revisal.." and he is therefore usually listed as the editor. John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1817-58). V., 167-8.

[19](#). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10.

[20](#). Fenn, *Memoirs*, 236.

[21](#). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[22](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, 385.

[23](#). Fenn 238-9.

[24](#). Many of these are preserved in N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11

[25](#). Suffolk Record Office (a microfilm copy is also held by the N.R.O. MF/RO 410/1).

- [26.](#) See *English Historical Review*, XCVI, 1981 79. William Cole also recorded this event (B.L. Addl MS. 5841 f.2). B.L. Addl Mss. 24318-9 include a copy of Martin's digest of the records and his 'Collections out of the Chapell & Muniment room at Eton College'.
- [27.](#) Richard Gough, *British Topography*, 2 vols. (London, 1780) II.2.
- [28.](#) This collection is described in more detail in Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Chorography of Suffolk*, Suffolk Record Society XIX (1976) 1-4, and David Stoker 'The Compilation and Production of a Classic County History'(unpublished M.Phil thesis, University of Reading, 1982).
- [29.](#) Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History*, III. 433.
- [30.](#) Public Record Office, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills. 1729, No.633 and George Stephen, *Three Centuries of a City Library*, (Norwich 1917) 24-5.
- [31.](#) *A Catalogue of the Valuable Library Collected by that truly laborious Antiquary, Peter Le Neve, Esq.; Norroy King of Arms... Which will be sold by Auction the 22nd Day of February 1730-1 at the Bedford Coffee-house... By John Wilcox, Bookseller.*
- [32.](#) Fenn, *Memoirs*, 239.
- [33.](#) Letter from Thomas Tanner to Francis Blomefield 22 October 1733. N.R.O. Rye Ms.32 ff.10-11.
- [34.](#) Letter from Thomas Tanner to Richard Rawlinson 2 October 1735 (Bodleian Library Rawlinson Letters 30 fo.31).
- [35.](#) See note 32.
- [36.](#) Letter from Francis Blomefield to John Tanner, 2 January 1735/6 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 fo.65).
- [37.](#) Francis Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of Norfolk*, 5 vols. (Fersfield, Norwich, Lynn, 1739-75), I. Introduction.
- [38.](#) Letter from Francis Blomefield to Henry Briggs 4 January 1734/4 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 ff.28-9.
- [39.](#) Nichols, *Literary anecdotes*, IX., 419.
- [40.](#) *Bibliotheca Martiniana: a Catalogue of the Entire Library of the late eminent Antiquary Mr Thomas Martin... which will be sold ... by Martin Booth and John Berry*, [Norwich?, 1772]
- [41.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/1 includes a large envelope including a book cover entitled *Typographical Antiquities*. Within this are several hundred slips compiled by Martin and John Fenn of books missing from Ames's edition of this work (London: 1749) notes of which were apparently supplied to William Herbert in preparation for the second edition (3 vols. 1785-90). See also John Fenn's letters to Herbert (Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History*, V. 168-70.
- [42.](#) Blomefield's discovery of these letters was mentioned in a letter from him to Major Weldon (Sir William Paston's executor) 13 May 1735 (N.R.O. Rye Ms.32 fo.33). They do not however appear in either a receipt for manuscripts taken by Martin from Mrs Blomefield in September 1752 or else a list of manuscripts purchased from her in 1753 (both N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10), it is possible therefore that they may have been acquired by Martin before Blomefield's death.
- [43.](#) Mary Muhl, 'A treatise of horsman shipp', *Time Literary Supplement*, 21 December 1967, 1245.
- [44.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/1/12 "Collections of political satirical amorous and miscellaneous verses of varying merit and length made by Peter Le Neve and Thomas Martin".
- [45.](#) For example he made purchases at Auditor Jett's auction, 1730, at Corbett's Auction February 1732, the Reverend Mr Pykarell's sale 1739, and Oswald's sale February 1740 (N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11).

[46.](#) These included Mr Marshall Woodbridge, 1745/6, Mr Glead Norwich 1741/2, Mr Jones Cockey Lane Norwich 1731 (who is not otherwise known as a bookseller), Fletcher Gyles London 1740, and various other unspecified booksellers in London and Winchester 1740 (N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11).

[47.](#) Lists of books purchased 1745 and 1720-1 respectively survive in N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11. In other cases it is not clear whether the purchases made were from members of the book trade or individuals.

[48.](#) Letter from Martin to Nehemiah Lodge April 1755 (N.R.O. Ms.453). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10 contains various priced lists of Blomefield's books and manuscripts including a list of purchases by Martin. Martin's and Charles Parkin's attempts at assisting Blomefield's widow are also recorded in letters between them N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10, and in various memoranda, Bodl. Lib. Ms.Top.Gen.c102.

[49.](#) Letter to Andrew Ducarel July 10, 1765 (Nichols, *Literary anecdotes*, IX., 426.

[50.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[51.](#) Ibid.

[52.](#) These are: *A Catalogue of the Library of Mr Thomas Martin of Palgrave in Suffolk, lately deceased*, (Lynn, 1772) ESTC t098426, *A Catalogue of the Entire Collection of Prints, Coins, &c &c. Of the late Mr Martin F.A.S.* (See Note 14). *Bibliotheca Martiniana: a catalogue of the library of the late eminent antiquary Mr Thomas Martin, ... Which will be sold ...Saturday June 5, by Martin Booth and John Berry*, ([Norwich], 1773) ESTC t098426. *A catalogue of the very Curious, Valuable, and Numerous Collection of manuscripts of Thomas Martin ... which will be sold by Auction, by S. Baker and G. Leigh, ... on Wednesday, April 28, 1773, ...* [London, 1773], and *A catalogue of the Remaining Part of the Library of the Late Well known Antiquary Mr. Martin.... Which will be sold, by Auction, by S. Baker and G. Leigh, ... on Wednesday the 18th of May 1774, [London, 1774].*

[53.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[54.](#) Martin regularly used the services of Samuel Harper from about January 1743 until the mid 1750s, making two copies of each record of books, one of

[55.](#) Other binders used include Mr Reason, February 1738/9 (presumably W. Reason of London) and Mrs Watson, April 1742 [of Bury St Edmunds]. NNAS c3/2/11.

[56.](#) Fenn and Cullum both wrote memoirs of Martin (see note 2). Ives subscribed for an engraved plate, and Gough edited Martin's notes.

[57.](#) All of these men either corresponded with Martin or else are mentioned in his correspondence.

[58.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/1/5, and Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX., 416.

[59.](#) Nichols, *Illustrations of Literature*, V., 436.

[60.](#) See David Stoker, 'Mr Parkin's magpie, the other Mr Whittingham, and the fate of Great Yarmouth', *The Library*, 6th ser. XII, 1990, 121-31. Parkin also gave Martin a copy of his *An impartial account of the Invasion under William Duke of Normandy*, (London, 1756) which he had published "out of pure love of old England, and to animate us all against any French invasion" (N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/4).

[61.](#) Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 428, and a letter from Mackerell to Francis Blomefield 17 October 1735 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 fo.46).

[62.](#) Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 413-29.

[63.](#) *Vertue Note books*, V. (Oxford, 1938). Walpole Society Vol. 26, 119

[64.](#) Letter from Blomefield to Bell, 27.12.1734 N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 f.28.

[65.](#) See note 2.

[66](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX., 420-1.

[67](#). N.R.O., NNAS c3/1/5.

[68](#). Fenn, *Memoirs*, 245, and John Chambers, *A general history of the county of Norfolk* (2 vols. Norwich 1829), II., 914.

[69](#). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[70](#). Fenn wrote 'An account of the disposal and total dispersion of Mr Martin's various collections' to accompany his 'Memoir', *Norfolk Archaeology*, XV., (1904) 249-66.

[71](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, VI. 439-41.

[72](#). Fenn, 'Memoirs', 245.

[73](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 428-9.

[74](#). For a detailed (although not entirely complete) account of the sale, see Fenn, 'An account of the disposal...' 249-66.

[75](#). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/12 'Mr Whittingham's appraisal of Mr Thomas Martin's Library, 1771.' and *A catalogue of the library of Mr Thomas Martin of Palgrave in Suffolk, lately deceased*, (Lynn: W. Whittingham, 1772) ESTC t098426,

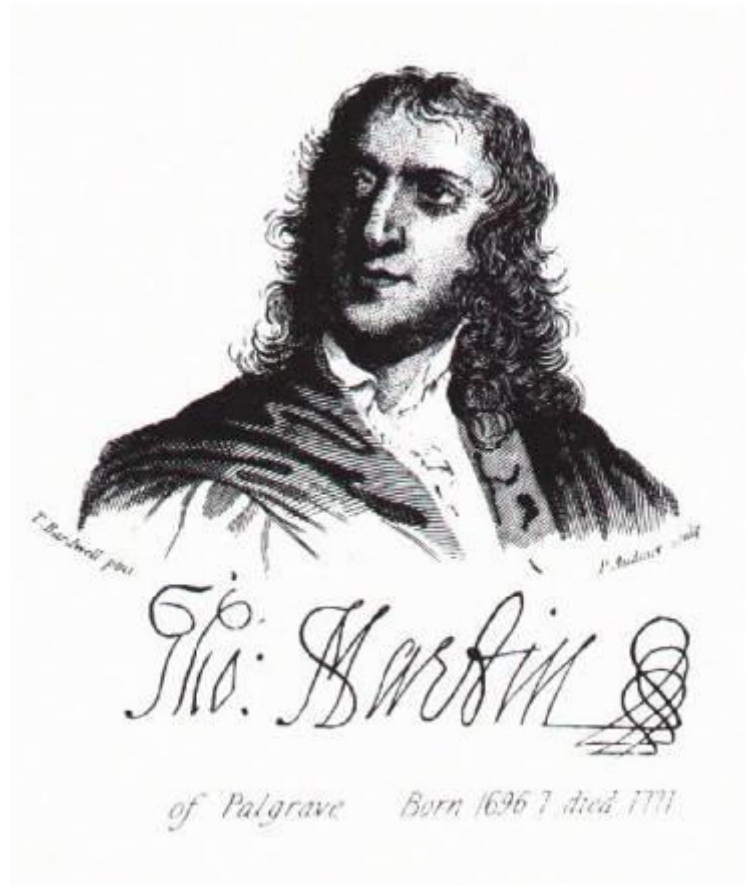
[76](#). *Proposals for printing by subscription the history of the town of Thetford, ... compiled from the papers of the late well-known antiquary, Mr Thomas Martin. By John Worth, F.A.S.*, [Norwich: John Crouse, 1774] (a copy is in the Norwich Public Library).

[77](#). Fenn's letters to Richard Gough regarding the purchase of the remaining materials from Hunt are published in Nichols, *Illustrations of the literary history*, V., 167-8.

[78](#). Most of this collection now constitutes the Frere Manuscripts, but other significant parts are preserved in the Duleep Singh collection and Norfolk and Norwich Antiquarian Society Manuscripts.

[79](#). Fenn, 'Memoirs' 248-9.

[80](#). Dibdin, *Bibliomania*, 384-6.



The ill-gotten library of 'Honest Tom' Martin.

The name of Thomas Martin is occasionally to be found in accounts of English book collectors of the eighteenth century, although often only as a footnote or passing reference.^{[1](#)} Such references usually note his unusual sobriquet, 'Honest Tom', and record that for forty years he had custody of the valuable Le Neve collection of manuscripts. Comparatively little has been written about Martin's own collecting activities, or the extent to which he added to the Le Neve collection. It is not generally realised that for a decade from the early 1750s he possessed of one of the three or four most valuable private libraries in England. Yet by the early 1760s he had to sell-off parts of his library. Within a few years of his death in 1771 the remaining books and manuscripts had been so totally dispersed as to make it difficult now to have any conception of its richness. This paper will therefore consider Tom Martin and his library: its acquisition, administration, the uses to which it was put, and the fate that befell it. However, it is first necessary to describe the man himself, for he was far from being a typical antiquarian and book collector.

Tom Martin was a skilled and intelligent attorney who hated practising law. He rather devoted all his energies together with several small fortunes to his two passions - strong drink, and the collection of historical antiquities. He came from the part of Thetford in the county of Suffolk.^{[2](#)} He was born 8th March 1696/7, the son of a well-to-do clergyman.^{[3](#)} As a young man he hoped to go to Cambridge, where his family had connections with Caius College.^{[4](#)} However his father rather chose a career in his elder brother's legal practice in the town. About 1722 he married a wealthy young widow. The following year they moved to the Suffolk village of Palgrave (close to the Norfolk market town of Diss), where he remained until his death in 1771.

Two quotations from the antiquary William Cole, will serve to describe his character.

He is a blunt, rough, honest downright man; of no behaviour or guile: often drunk in a morning with strong beer, and for breakfast, when others had tea or coffee, he had beef steaks, or other strong meat. - His thirst after antiquities was as great as after liquors: the one injured his fortune, as the other did health.[5](#)

Similarly

Mr Martin has an house at Thetford also at Palgrave. I once spent a week with him. An attorney of good practice, & would be better, was he not too much given to drinking. However he is an honest man, & of a curious inquisitive turn in all matters relating to antiquity, which has rather injured his fortune as it is supposed. For tho' he had a good private fortune of his own, independent of his practice, which he made away with & was again set up by a very good estate which fell to him, yet such was his thirst after curiosities in the antiquary way, that it is supposed he has hurt himself again.[6](#)

Martin displayed many of the symptoms of an alcoholic, for according to Sir John Fenn,

When he began what he called a frolic, he would never give up whilst his money lasted, but would continue it for days and nights together, treating and carousing with porters, chairmen and persons of the lowest rank, to whom you might often find him (when surrounded in the porter cellar) telling stories and singing songs with every degree of humour suited to his company.

After an adventure of this kind he would *latterly* lie in bed for a considerable time, lament his imprudence, eat little, and drink only water.[7](#)

Martin's constitution must have been quite robust however, in spite of the damage he is supposed to have done to his health. At the age of sixty-five he still had

so great a pliancy of limbs that he could turn his foot so as to place a glass of liquor on the sole of it and drink it off.[8](#)

At the same time it could also be said of him that:-

As an antiquary, he was most skilful and indefatigable; and when he was employed as an attorney and genealogist, he was in his element.... He had the happiest use of his pen, copying, as well as tracing, with dispatch and exactness, the different writing of every aera, and tricking arms, seals, &c, with great neatness. His taste for antient lore seems to have possessed him from his earliest to his latest days. He dated all the scraps of paper on which he made his church notes, & c. Some of these begin as early as 1721, and end but the autumn before his death, when he still wrote an excellent hand; but he certainly began his collections even before the first mentioned period,...[9](#)

Among his papers are large numbers of facsimiles of charters, together with other documents, and drawings of coins or seals.[10](#)

Nearly all the surviving biographical accounts of Martin, and references to him in the correspondence of the leading antiquaries and historians of his day, remark upon his two apparently insatiable appetites. Curiously, in some way or other they will also frequently allude to his "honesty", in one way or another. To give an example, in 1737, the historian Francis Blomefield wrote to explain his non-appearance at a friend's house thus:-

At the time I design'd I set out with Honest Tom Martin in order for Darsingham but the weather proving bad & having the good fortune to load ourselves with antiquity before we reached Lynn, and my companion loosing 2 days there by loading himself with a stronger tho' not heavier burthen. I determined to return, & wait on you in the spring.[11](#)

This then was 'Honest' Tom Martin,[12](#) a "Squire Western" figure of the antiquarian world, who was yet renowned among the great historians of his time; a cherished member of the Society of Antiquaries for fifty three years.[13](#)

Although other examples of Martin's "frolics" are recorded by Fenn and Cullum, less detail is given about his literary pursuits, and in particular, his magpie-like obsession with collecting historical materials. These included not only printed and manuscript books, but documents of all kinds, prints, paintings, or any artefact with historical associations which his wife would allow in the house. His collection of coins and tokens was so renowned, that Francis Blomefield used it as an additional attraction when writing to invite his numismatist friends to visit him.[14](#) The sale of his property also included such varied items as an Indian tomahawk, various mediaeval weapons, Roman urns, lamps, spurs, horse bits, pieces of sculpture, a sword-fish, sea shells, fossils, petrifications, and an ostrich egg.[15](#)

It was an undirected fascination providing him with an enormous working knowledge of English antiquities and a reference library the envy of many contemporary historians. Yet at the same time it disabled him from any limited field of study. He never published anything in his lifetime, in spite of often claiming to "have several things upon the anvil which I have hopes of publishing"[16](#) In 1743 he boasted to John Tanner

As for my part (was it not for my family) I could be content to live almost on bread and water the remainder of my days, so I might have leisure to publish only some Fragmenta Antiquitatis, which I have amassed together, and an Appendix to Mr. Blomefield's History of Thetford, &c.[17](#)

However, the history of Thetford bearing his name was compiled on his behalf from the many notes he had collected on the subject but had never managed to write up.[18](#)

Even in his historical collecting, the rough and ready character of the man comes through, as is shown by the following excerpt from one of thousands of loose sheets that he added to his library, each containing pieces of information he considered worthy of record.

On Tuesday Morning [24th September 1751] came to the Crown in Swaffham
Wall the Spanish Ambassador Lord Anson
His Grace the Duke of Grafton Jeffries Esqr
Lord Euston his Grandson Southcoate Esqr
Lord De La Ware Furneis Esqr
Lord Leicester

They came from Euston Hall and were going to Lord Leicesters at Holkham. Lord Delaware had a wooden nose on such as the Buffoons use, which he put on and took off at pleasure. His Grace of G----n was observ'd to make water twice the short time they staid at Swaffham (to drink a dish of coffee, and change horses &c) in doing which office (the second time, under his chariot), several spectators (inter quo ipse sui) observ'd his p---- (for the size whereof he has been remarkably famous). It was short, but surprisingly thick, of a swarthy complexion, and look'd something like the end of a collar'd eel, before 'tis cut asunder.[19](#)

Background

Martin appears to have been a born antiquary, collector, and librarian. He was largely self taught, having had a sorely neglected education. For many years he was the only pupil at the Thetford free school, being left to read on his own.[20](#) Among his papers, there survives a notebook written in a youthful hand entitled "A catalogue of mine and my father's books which I use" later annotated "written when a school boy". It contains eighty four titles.[21](#) Otherwise his leisure time seems to have been spent in exploring the many ruins and other relics of the past in the town. As he commented in a letter lamenting his lot, "I'm sure there can be no worse town under the sun for breeding and conversation".[22](#)

About 1710 Thetford was visited by the elderly Peter Le Neve, Norroy King of Arms; first President of the revived Society of Antiquaries. He sought a guide to the many antiquities of the town only to be told that no-one knew more than thirteen-year old Master Martin.[23](#) The result was the growth of a close friendship between the learned old man and the teenage boy lasting until the death of the former. This served also to encourage the antiquarian leanings of the latter.

As a young man Martin soon became an avid purchaser of books and manuscripts for his private library. Many lists of such purchases made by Martin from London or provincial booksellers, book auctions, and private collectors dating from 1720 onwards survive in the Norfolk Record Office.[24](#) However his serious collecting seems to have coincided with his astute marriage and move to Palgrave two years later. The Suffolk Record Office holds a detailed personal account book by him for the period from 1726 to 1731, indicating in great detail how he spent every penny of his money.[25](#)

He also became interested in, and adept at, the organisation and classification of large documentary collections. At different times in his life he reorganised several, including his own. In fact the only lengthy period he spent away from his native Suffolk appears to have been during the Summer and Autumn of 1724 when he was paid thirty pounds by the authorities of Eton College for setting the muniment room in order and compiling a digest of many of the records there. The staff at Eton still value his work which is recorded by a wooden plaque in the library.[26](#)

Martin's Library

At its height, circa 1761 Martin's private library probably consisted of about 12,000 printed books, several thousand manuscript volumes. In addition it included many tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of unbound documents. During the intervening period he had brought up two large families, (he married twice within a decade; each of his wives bearing him eight

children about half of whom lived to adulthood). As a well-to-do young lawyer, with such family responsibilities, he might have built up a respectable library, but he would never have been able to amass a collection on this scale by legal means. The true origin of much of Martin's library lay not with the attorney himself, but rather his rich elderly friend Peter Le Neve. The irregular way in which Le Neve's manuscripts came into Martin's possession, (the circumstances of which were perhaps known to a least some of Martin's circle) makes his nickname seem something of a joke.

Peter Le Neve had intended to write the topographical history of Norfolk and had devoted the greater part of his life to collecting materials for the task. He spent years systematically searching for, and indexing, Norfolk references in the major series of Public Record. Also as Norroy King of Arms he also had access to the genealogical and heraldic manuscripts of the College of Arms. However, in spite of his enormous scholarship and capacity for study, he also, like his young friend Thomas Martin, had a temperament unsuited to write a historical narrative. Le Neve published nothing during his lifetime. His obsessional gathering of as much material as possible meant that at the time of his death in 1729 he had built up an enormous collection of manuscripts. Richard Gough later described it as "the greatest fund of antiquities for his native county that ever was collected for any single one in the kingdom".²⁷ It was this accumulation which fell into Martin's hands.

Le Neve's Norfolk (and to a lesser extent Suffolk) collections fell into three broad categories.²⁸ He had many original historical documents such as cartularies, feodaries, manorial court rolls etc. Secondly he had created a series of calendars and indexes to Norfolk and Suffolk references in the Public Records, and College of Arms. Finally there was a truly massive jumble of miscellaneous information on tiny slips or scraps of paper, compiled from a vast array of sources by many different hands, and thousands of other loose papers. These were all organised in a crude topographical order.

Many of these slips had been written by Le Neve or his amanuensis, or one of the circle of "Icenian" antiquaries with whom he corresponded and regularly exchanged notes. (This group included men such as John Kirkpatrick, Benjamin Mackerell, Thomas Tanner and Thomas Martin).²⁹ Many, however consisted of the dissected notes of earlier antiquaries and similarly mutilated documents such as letters and accounts. Thus several historical collections by others (acquired by Le Neve during his lifetime) had been cut up for this crude filing system, making their origins impossible to trace.

Le Neve was a rich, but a cantankerous and eccentric man who whilst in his seventies had married a young and strong-willed wife. He frequently changed his mind about his will, particularly concerning his extensive library of printed books and manuscripts. At one time he intended to leave them all to the College of Arms, but subsequently he changed his mind. As a result he left an imperfect will, which caused a long and expensive legal contest over the subsequent ownership of his estates. However, indisputably Le Neve eventually intended his vast manuscripts relating to Norfolk and Suffolk to be available for public use. They were to be deposited within a year of his death, in a suitable repository either in Norwich Cathedral or some other public building in the city.³⁰ To that end he appointed as Executors for this task his friends Thomas Tanner the Chancellor of the Diocese, and Thomas Martin. The will indicated that instructions for the disposal of the remainder of his literary and historical materials would be found in a note to be left in his writing desk prior to his decease.

The various Le Neve collections were however so extensive and ill-defined that Tom Martin, Thomas Tanner, and the young wife Frances Le Neve, could not agree exactly what was included in each collection. They shelved the problem pending the disposal of the printed books. Le Neve's note indicated that they were to be left to a distant relative in London, who promptly arranged to sell them by auction during the winter of 1730/1. Martin was one of the principal purchasers at this sale.[31](#)

Before and after the auction, Tom Martin was in his element. He spent many hours at his late friend's house in Great Witchingham, listing, examining and sorting the various manuscript collections, in much the same way as he had done at Eton College. However by the autumn of 1731 (two years after Le Neve's death) the executors had still taken no action regarding the Norfolk and Suffolk manuscripts. Within a few months however this situation changed radically. In November Thomas Martin's first wife, Sarah, died soon after giving birth to twins, leaving him the care of eight young children. In December, Tanner heard he had been elevated to the see of St Asaph. He had quickly to wind up his affairs in Norfolk prior to his consecration at Lambeth on 23 January 1732: thereafter he never had the opportunity to return to his adopted county. In the same month of January the marriage of Thomas Martin and Frances Le Neve not only solved the domestic problems of the former but had the added virtue of temporarily resolving the custody of the Norfolk and Suffolk manuscripts.[32](#)

After a short period the couple moved to Martin's house at Palgrave, taking with them the enormous manuscript collections destined for public use in Norwich; ostensibly until the question of their future custody could be resolved. Bishop Tanner was far from happy about the irregular way in which Martin and his wife had taken the manuscripts to Palgrave. However he could not do anything, unless he was willing to risk the cost of a Chancery suit against his co-executor, for the sake of a Diocese he had now left. In any event, other more valuable parts of Le Neve's considerable estate were already the subject of a costly lawsuit which eventually went to the House of Lords.

More than once Tanner wrote to Martin requesting that they should meet in London to discuss the matter.[33](#) Martin implied he would soon talk his wife into accepting Tanner's interpretation of the will.[34](#) However, partly as a result of the bishop's subsequent ill-health, Martin succeeded in delaying and ultimately avoiding any such meeting. Tanner's conscience was eased a little after 1733. He discovered that Martin was making the materials freely available to Francis Blomefield who had advertised the first of three topographical histories of East Anglian counties based upon them.[35](#) However Tanner was never completely reconciled to the situation up to his death in 1735. One side effect of Martin's conduct was that the Bishop subsequently left all his manuscripts to the Bodleian Library rather than to Norwich Cathedral, much to the dismay and disgust of the Norfolk antiquarian community.[36](#)

In the introduction to the first volume of his history, Blomefield gratefully acknowledged Martin's help, both in providing material from his own collections, and also making available to him those of Le Neve, "they resting in his hands until they be properly disposed of according to Mr. Le Neve's will".[37](#) However, with no individual having any claim on the ownership, they were gradually amalgamated into Martin's own library and all thought of their being housed in a public repository was soon forgotten. This had clearly been Martin's intention, and indeed, within three years of their move to Palgrave, Blomefield was assisting him dispose of a few choice items to private collectors.[38](#) It is not possible to say whether or not the nature of Martin's conduct was widely known among his contemporaries, although

clearly at least some of the men who referred to him as "Honest Tom" were aware of his malversation.

Further Acquisitions

However, at the same time, and throughout the next twenty five to thirty years Martin was constantly adding to his collection by purchase and by other means. For as he said in a letter to Andrew Ducarel of December 1757.

My numerous family and small income oblige me to be as frugal as possible; but wholly to abridge myself from buying some few books in the study I so much delight in, would be worse than imprisonment, or death itself.[39](#)

One might however question whether or not the amassing of more than 10,000 printed books over a forty year period can fairly be described as "buying some few books".

Most of Martin's additions were of printed books, and in all learned subjects, although the emphasis was on British history. The sale catalogue of his printed books does however also contain substantial numbers of books in French, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, Saxon, Arabic and Hebrew.[40](#) In addition there were nearly 800 works described as "Black letter books" including significant numbers of British and European incunabula. In particular the early works of de Worde and Pynson's presses are well represented. It was from these books and other collections that Martin was able to provide additional material for both Joseph Ames and William Herbert for respective their editions of the *Typographical antiquities*.[41](#)

He was however always ready to purchase manuscript collections or individual documents. One major acquisition was the purchase (possibly from Blomefield's widow) of the "innumerable letters of good consequence in history", which her husband had borrowed from the executors of the last Earl of Yarmouth,[42](#) and apparently never returned. These are, of course, now known to scholars as "the Paston Letters". Another major manuscript acquired from Blomefield, although one which neither man recognised, was the earliest surviving manuscript of Sir Philip Sydney's *Defence of poetry*, bound up with others in a volume entitled *Liber Miscellan*.[43](#)

Martin also continued to add large numbers of drawings, transcripts, letters and other loose papers to Le Neve's collections of these, as did Francis Blomefield during the periods he was using them. The majority were topographical or genealogical, although other packages contained notes of early printed books, and political, satirical and other verses. This last contains some examples of Martin's own poetry, including one poem in praise of drinking.[44](#) Also there is a most interesting short poem on the nature of intellectual freedom, transcribed from the "bog wall" of one of the Inns of Court, although this may have been the work of Le Neve.

Martin was a regular participant in auctions in Norwich and elsewhere in East Anglia,[45](#) and regularly made purchases from booksellers in town and country.[46](#) He was also clearly attracted to the newly widowed. His surviving papers show how he made extensive purchases not only from the surviving relicts of gentlemen collectors, such as Elizabeth Blomefield. He also made substantial purchases from the widows of deceased booksellers such as the Widow of David Samuel of Kings Lynn, or of Mrs Barber of Thetford.[47](#) However it should not be assumed that his contact with the bereaved was always purely for mercenary advantage.

Martin seems to have spent months sorting Francis Blomefield's papers which "were delivered to me in such wretched confusion that my pains have been unaccountable in sorting them out".[48](#) Over the next decade he also went to considerable trouble to assist her in disposing of the stocks of her husband's printed history.[49](#)

By 1753 Martin's reputation as a collector was such, that his advice was sought by a certain Edward Holden over the disposal of "a curious collection of pamphlets & manuscripts".[50](#) They were described as "the tedious labours of twenty years during the troublesome times of King Charles, containing many transactions as yet secret to the world". As Holden wrote "I know well your taste and love of antiquity & curiosities and therefore pray you'll maturely consider how best and to whom an offer of such a fine collection shou'd be made". Unfortunately Martin's reply has not been preserved, but given the ultimate fate of most of his library, perhaps it is as well that he did not have the resources to purchase the Thomason Tracts.

Administration of Library

Tom Martin, when sober, was an orderly man who loved arranging and classifying historical documents, who meticulously recorded all his book purchases. He also compiled many lists and catalogues of the different parts of his collections, such as "Books in my library which relate to the antiquities and other curiosities of the city of Rome"[51](#) etc. etc.. If there was any complete catalogue however, it does not appear to have survived, although much of the collection can be pieced together from the five surviving sale catalogues compiled after his death.[52](#)

Unfortunately he has left little evidence as to how he arranged his library, other than that there must have been book cases throughout the house and those in his study contained his most prized possessions. There is however a classification scheme for his substantial print collection, entitled "The manner how my prints are plac'd in the Dining Room".[53](#) This was an alphabetical system:-

- A Antiques
- B Scripture
- C Beasts, Birds
- D Landskips
- E Battles, Sieges
- F Foreign Buildings
- G Seals, Arms, Pedigrees, Foreign
- H Conversations, Still life
- I Hawking, Hunting, sports
- K Parliaments, Coronations, Funeralls
- L General Maps
- M Monies, Coins, Medals
- N Deeds, Seals
- O Deeds, Seals, Heads
- P British Arms
- Q Knights of the Garter
- R Miscellaneous.

Then there was a gap in the scheme until:

X Prints promiscuous (to be sorted)
Y Duplicates to be exchange'd or sold
Z Miscellaneous original drawings.

There are also many records of his dealings with his bookbinders, in particular Samuel Harper. He was a countryman from the nearby village of Syleham, who appears to have trudged round the neighbourhood collecting twenty odd books at a time and returning them later. Martin used Harper's services for more than a decade and meticulously recorded every book as it was sent, and when it was returned.⁵⁴ He also recorded his purchases of binding materials, some of which survive. For example in March 1742/3 he asked the local carriers to purchase six rough calf and three pair sheep skins from Charles and Daniel Franklin, Leathersellers in Butchers Row Temple Bar, which cost him seven shillings and three shillings respectively. At the same time he ordered six quire of Marble paper from Thomas Dowson, for seven shillings and six pence.⁵⁵

Exploitation

The picture painted hitherto, of an orderly, but rather disreputable (if not dishonest) man does not explain the considerable affection and admiration in which he was held by two generations of English antiquaries. It does not explain why men such as Sir John Fenn the editor of the Paston Letters, Sir John Cullum, Baronet, John Ives - the Suffolk Herald, and the topographer Richard Gough should go to considerable trouble and expense to perpetuate his memory.⁵⁶ The answer may be because Martin would always make available the resources of his library, and give unstintingly of his time to anyone interested in historical research. In a period when scholars outside London and the universities rarely had access to the materials they needed, correspondence with Martin could be a considerable asset.

Although he cannot be described as a historian, Martin's influence on contemporary historical writing was nevertheless considerable. His massive library was not the idle hobby of a rich man but was put to good use in assisting others. The following contains the names of a few of the antiquaries, historians, and numismatists of national repute whom Martin is known to have assisted. Browne Willis, Thomas Gale, William Cole, Andrew Ducarel, Sir Andrew Fountain, Joseph Ames, William Herbert, George Vertue, Richard Rawlinson, William Stukeley, Philip Carteret Webb, and Edward Rowe Mores.⁵⁷ Martin's correspondence with Andrew Ducarel also indicates that in 1755 and 1756 he went to considerable trouble to track down and retrieve some manuscripts on behalf of a Mr Franks of Pontefract. In particular he endeavoured to retrieve some valuable drawings that had been "stuck upon the walls of a parson's necessary house"⁵⁸

Thus a good many of the books in the library were donations by their grateful authors. John Tanner when sending a copy of his revision of his brother's *Notitia Monastica*, desired Martin "should not speak of it lest every one whom he had any little assistance from should expect the same".⁵⁹

However it was in his native East Anglia where Martin's had the most noticeable influence on contemporary historiography. Tom Martin appears to have persuaded his neighbour Francis Blomefield to undertake the massive history of Norfolk based upon Le Neve's materials and provided him with every opportunity and assistance to use them. When Blomefield died in 1752, only part of the way through the job, it was Martin who went to considerable further trouble to persuade Charles Parkin to complete the work. Parkin also died before the history

was published, and once again it appears to have been Martin who took pains to persuade the Kings Lynn bookseller William Whittingham to risk publishing the work.[60](#) Similarly Martin was active in assisting Henry Swinden to compile his history of Great Yarmouth, and earlier he corresponded with Benjamin Mackerell the historian of Kings Lynn and Norwich.[61](#) Towards the end of his life he assisted and corresponded with Philip Morant the historian of Essex, James Bentham the historian of Ely Cathedral, and Sir Joseph Ayloffe the would-be historian of Suffolk.[62](#)

Martin's library also appears to have been regarded as something of a tourist attraction among the learned who happened to be visiting East Anglia. The engraver and antiquary George Vertue has left an account of one such brief visit in 1739.

From thence wee went to see Thom: Martin at Palgrave brother Antiquary - who entertaind us with much Friendly civility. his Collections are very curious and valuable his pictures &c. Armes grants Chartularies Mss. of many kinds great collections towards the History of Suffolk & Norfolk. some rare old printed books. this collection & his own collections of Notes & remarkable deeds is very numerous. and woud require much time to consider well. all the time wee had there that evening & next morning was fully employd, to see and cursorily observe what was possible in our short stay.[63](#)

Similarly, in 1734, Francis Blomefield had used the comparative proximity of Martin's coin collection, as an added inducement when seeking to persuade his friend Beaupre Bell to come and visit him.[64](#)

The fate of the library

Martin ought not to have been a poor man. He had a reasonable inheritance, his income as an attorney, the considerable assets brought by each of his wives, and later legacies from his brother. Yet he did not have the financial resources to maintain his chosen style of living. As Sir John Cullum described it:

Mr. Martin's desire was not only to be esteemed, but to be known and distinguished by the name of Honest Tom Martin of Palgrave, an ambition in which his acquaintance saw no reason not to gratify him. ... Had he desired the appellation of wise and prudent, his inattention to his business, his contempt and improper use of money, and his fondness for mixed and festive company, would have debarred him, as the father of a numerous family, of that pretension. He died poor, having been little attentive to frugality and sobriety; but left behind him the character of an honest man.[65](#)

By 1762 his profligate life-style, and obsessional book-collecting eventually caught up with him. In April of that year Andrew Ducarel the librarian at Lambeth Palace received a sorry account from his friend in Palgrave blaming everybody else for his troubles except their true author.

My eldest son has married very imprudently; that daughter .. now is, and for two years, past has been, confined, through a high disorder in her senses, without any present symptoms of ever recovering. My second son (whom I had bound out to a Surgeon and Apothecary) enlisted for a common soldier.

Others in my family, either afflicted with sickness, or not behaving with that dutifulness, as to be any company in my old age. &c. &c. And, to complete my calamities fortune has seemed for a long while past to frown upon me. Pardon me, my dear friend, for troubling you with this ungrateful detail of my misfortune, but, in short, they have brought me under a necessity of parting with my large and expensive Collection of Books, Deeds, Coins, and various other Curiosities, in my life-time. Nor do I repine at it, as I have no child who understands any thing about them. The great hardship is the present scarcity of money, and want of friends to advise and direct me in what method to dispose of them to the best advantage. Sometimes I am thinking of finding out some Nobleman or Gentleman who would purchase them all together; sometimes of offering the most choice of them to the British Museum; and at other times of exposing them to a public sale or auction in town.[66](#)

This letter marks the beginning of the end of the collection. Ducarel replied giving his advice and commiseration:-

Drs Commons May 4 1762

My good friend

I received your kind letter of the 25th April on Friday last - It has given me an infinite concern; & the series of Misfortunes which seem at once, to overwhelm you, will I hope, thro' gods blessing, daily decrease; & to enjoy a good state of health, at this particular time, is a peculiar Happiness from Heaven - As I have no connexions in Suffolk all you mentioned was entirely new to me & as to your daughter, who lived in London, I had neither seen nor heard any thing about her for upwards of two years-

The best advice I can give you, you are welcome to - & since you are now under a necessity of parting with your large & expensive collection, the business is, to do it in the most advantageous manner - For that purpose I have this day consulted with our old friend Dr Birch - & we both agree first that the best way will be to dispose of the whole collection by auction & recommend Baker the Bookseller as the properest person to be employed in the management thereof.

As to ye Books - We *both* agree 2dly that Baker is the fittest person to make a Catalogue of them & the Mss. & to dispose them properly.

3dly As to ye old deeds Chartae &c &c &c we both agree that Baker is not a proper person to make a Catalogue of them - but that your self should draw up a list or account of them, Which you can easily do; as, we apprehend, they are digested according to their counties -

4thly We both agree that we do not know any nobleman or Gentleman now in this kingdom who would purchase the whole collection of chartae &c together - & that even if such a Nobleman could be found it would be almost impossible to find persons, properly qualified, to set a true value & Estimation of them between the buyer & the seller.

5thly We both agree that if these are put up to auction, in parcells according to the Counties, they will fetch a much greater price by that means than by any other.

6thly We both agree that the list or Catalogue of the old Deeds & c should be published a month, at least, before the Auction begins that Gentlemen might be apprized, in time, of what they are.

7thly We both think it not improbable that Baker will advance money upon the Collection; when in his hands but that he will confine himself to the Books & Mss only, as to the Loan of money...[67](#)

The bookseller referred to is, of course, Samuel Baker of York Street, the original founder of Sotheby's, and who specialised in Antiquarian book auctions.

Ducarel also undertook to approach the Archbishop to see whether he would be prepared to buy any of his friend's manuscripts relating to the see of Canterbury. However, when it came to it Martin simply could not bring himself to sell more books than he needed to meet his immediate debts. The next nine years therefore saw a gradual selling of books and manuscripts as creditors became so pressing that they could no longer be ignored. However he hated parting with any book, describing it as "driving the first nail in his coffin".[68](#) He listed several hundred books in a document which he later endorsed "These I once intended to have parted with but now have taken those with this mark into my study."[69](#) Over half of the books have been so marked.

1763 saw the sale of the valuable collection of gold and silver medals to Lord Maynard.[70](#) By 1768 his situation was again so bad that he was forced to invite the London bookseller Thomas Payne to visit Palgrave and make him an offer for whatever books he would. (This bookseller was incidentally described by John Nichols as "Honest Tom Payne".[71](#)) John Fenn has a pathetic account of this period:

Whilst Mr Payne was examining his library and picking out such books as he thought proper, Mr Martin would never come near him, though often in a morning early, whilst every one else was in bed, he would get up, go down into his library, take away and hide up such old curious books as he most valued. Many of these were found after his death hidden in various parts of the house.[72](#)

Epilogue

Martin died in March 1771 a sorely disappointed man. Almost to the end he would always assist anyone who applied to him for information from his library, even though he could see he would not live to see the results of such labours in print.[73](#) Not surprisingly, his widow had no great attachment to the books and manuscripts which had dominated her life through two marriages and ensured their old age was lived in poverty. She immediately let it be known that she was going to dispose of the collection largely for the benefit of her husband's creditors. Over the few months she sold many of the most choice items to antiquarian friends of her husband such as John Fenn and John Ives and other private collectors. It was probably at this time that John Fenn acquired the Paston letters, which he later published.

The complete dispersion of the Martin's remaining library took place over the next seven or eight years, in such a way as if destiny were conspiring to remove all traces of this illegitimate collection as quickly as possible.⁷⁴ The bookseller William Whittingham of King's Lynn, who had collaborated with Martin in the publication of the remaining parts of Blomefield's *History* was called in to make an overall appraisal of the remaining collections.⁷⁵ These were then sold

John Worth, to a Diss Chemist, and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, for £660: a fraction of their true value. Worth quickly auctioned off the pictures, prints, ancient weapons etc. in Diss. He also sold many manuscripts directly to John Ives. Then in 1773 the printed books were sold en masse to the Norwich booksellers Booth and Berry for £330. They in turn sold large numbers by weight in Diss and then removed about 6,000 to Norwich, where they were disposed of in a marked catalogue priced at more than £2,000. Most of the remaining manuscripts were auctioned by what had become the firm of Baker and Leigh in London, in April 1773, and May 1774 and raised a further £450.

John Worth also intended to publish Martin's long expected account of Thetford. He advertised the work, commissioned some engravings and a few sheets were printed in Norwich. However shortly afterwards, in December 1774, he too died insolvent.⁷⁶ All that remained of Martin's collections was then purchased by Mr. Hunt, bookseller, at Harleston, who incorporated them into a marked catalogue, and sold the rest to private purchasers.⁷⁷ The dispersion was completed premature death of John Ives's and the dispersal of his collection in London, in March 1777. All that remained of the collection at the end was the many bundles of loose papers originally been compiled by Le Neve, which eventually Sir John Fenn agreed to take, merely to save them from destruction. Most of them now exist in the Norfolk Record Office, and although they are a gold mine for seventeenth and eighteenth century history, but a nightmare to use.⁷⁸

Martin's friends did not forget him however.

According to Fenn, Tom Martin was:-

A friendly and cheerful neighbour, and when sober, an instructive and entertaining companion; and would he have paid that attention to his profession that his abilities enabled him to do, and which circumstances and children required he should do, he might have possessed such a fortune as would have entitled him both to have pursued his favourite amusements with comfort and satisfaction, and to have provided for his family; but being always distressed, his mind was uneasy, and he too often sought relief from low company.⁷⁹

Dibdin's assessment was

Martin's book pursuits were miscellaneous, and perhaps a little too wildly followed up;; yet some good fortune contributed to furnish his collection with volumes of singular curiosity.⁸⁰

Much of Ives' *Pastoral elegy* is rather amateurish, and not worth preserving, although four verses do perhaps contribute to the picture of the man.

Strephon
Antiquity in him her Champion lost;
Of all her votaries few with him compared:
Her relicts purchased at the dearest cost:
Others with him the curious pleasure shared.

Damon
With fixt contempt he viewed the gilded Ore,
Which holds so many thousands in its chains:
Few will in search of knowledge make them poor
We'll hope the pleasure paid him for his pains.

Strephon
And sure it did for goodness ruled his heart;
Complacency was seated in his breast;
Honor and Probity, held each a part.
And Honesty composed his Soul to rest.

Damon
His lively sallies shewed a chearfull mind -
On goodness chearfullness will sure attend:
Yet did his Wit oft leave a sting behind
For not exempt from faults was this our Friend.

The closing verse would also make an appropriate epitaph, to this singular, if misguided book collector.

Strephon
Oh! Sight of woe! - sad, sable, awfull, slow:
Grim Death, thy power disown, what mortal can?
The victim thou has summon'd, Tyrant know,
Now sleeps at peace - he was - *an Honest Man*.

David Stoker

October 1990

Footnotes

[1.](#) Thomas F. Dibdin, *Bibliomania*, (London:Chatto & Windus, 1876) 384. William Younger Fletcher, *English book collectors*, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1902) 148. and Seymour De Ricci, *English collectors of books & manuscripts, (1530-1930) and their marks of ownership*, (Cambridge University Press, 1930), 65, 68.

[2.](#) The best sources for Martin's early life are the account taken from his own notes in his *History of Thetford* ed. R. Gough (London: J. Nichols, 1779), 284-5 and the memoir of Martin by Sir John Cullum which was prefixed to this work (xi-xviii). In addition Sir John Fenn prepared 'Memoirs of the life of Thomas Martin, Gent.,' which were read to the Society of Antiquaries on 23rd November 1780, and which he subsequently enlarged in 1784. These were not however published until 1904 (*Norfolk Archaeology*, XV. (1904) 233-48). There are also accounts of Martin in *D.N.B.*, and John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 9 vols (London: J. Nichols, 1812-15), V. 384 et seq., but these are derived from the earlier sources.

[3.](#) His father was William Martin, rector of Great Livermore and Curate of St Mary's Thetford.

[4.](#) His mother was Elizabeth Burrough, aunt of Sir James Burrough, subsequently master of Caius College.

[5.](#) British Library Addl MS. 5876 f.88.

[6.](#) B.L. Addl MS. 5833 f.166

[7.](#) Fenn, *Memoirs*, 246.

[8.](#) Fenn, *Memoirs*, 241.

[9.](#) Cullum (see note 2).

[10.](#) For example, Norfolk Record Office, Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society Deposit, NNAS c3/2/5 contains large numbers of Martin's transcripts and facsimiles of Elizabethan deeds. Martin's papers are now widely dispersed among manuscript collections, although the majority of Martin's are in the Norfolk Record Office. The two main sources are the Frere Manuscripts, and the Norfolk & Norwich Archaeological Society Deposit (both collections are largely uncatalogued). Other materials are to be found in the Duleep Singh Deposit, Castle Museum Deposit, and Colman Manuscripts. There are also surviving manuscripts in the Suffolk Record Office, the British Library, among the Gough Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Arundel Castle and also probably in collections overseas.

[11.](#) Letter to Samuel Kerrich, rector of Dersingham 13 December 1737 (N.R.O. NNAS c3/1/9 fo.20).

[12.](#) The origin of Martin's sobriquet is discussed by Fenn (246), and is said to date from its mysterious appearance on the subscription list for Grey's *Hudibras* in 1744. However it is clear from the previous reference that its use predates this by at least seven years.

[13.](#) He was admitted Fellow in 1718 on the recommendation of Peter Le Neve, President of the Society. He also later became a member of the Gentleman's Society of Spalding.

[14.](#) Letter to Beaupre Bell 27 December 1734 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 f.28).

[15.](#) Many of these are listed in Thomas Worth's *A catalogue of the entire collection prints, coins, &c &c. Of the late Mr Martin F.A.S. which will be sold by Auction at the King's-Head of Diss Norfolk on Thursday the 29th and Friday the 30th and Saturday the 31st October and Monday the 2nd November 1772* ([London?], 1772)

[16.](#) Letter to Andrew Ducarel 25 May 1762. N.R.O. NNAS C.3/1/5.

[17.](#) Letter to John Tanner July 27, 1743, in Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 413. Blomefield noted in his *A History of the Ancient City and Burgh of Thetford*, (Fersfield, 1739) that a fuller account was expected from his friend Thomas Martin.

[18.](#) John Fenn wrote to Richard Gough in 1777 "The Thetford History was compiled from Mr. Martin's papers, in Mr Worth's possession, by a Mr Davis dissenting minister, who lived at Diss". However according to Richard Gough's preface to the work, he "bought the manuscript, with the undigested materials, copy-right, and plates. The first of these required a general revisal.." and he is therefore usually listed as the editor. John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1817-58). V., 167-8.

[19.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10.

[20.](#) Fenn, *Memoirs*, 236.

[21.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[22.](#) Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, 385.

[23.](#) Fenn 238-9.

[24.](#) Many of these are preserved in N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11

[25.](#) Suffolk Record Office (a microfilm copy is also held by the N.R.O. MF/RO 410/1).

- [26.](#) See *English Historical Review*, XCVI, 1981 79. William Cole also recorded this event (B.L. Addl MS. 5841 f.2). B.L. Addl Mss. 24318-9 include a copy of Martin's digest of the records and his 'Collections out of the Chapell & Muniment room at Eton College'.
- [27.](#) Richard Gough, *British Topography*, 2 vols. (London, 1780) II.2.
- [28.](#) This collection is described in more detail in Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Chorography of Suffolk*, Suffolk Record Society XIX (1976) 1-4, and David Stoker 'The Compilation and Production of a Classic County History'(unpublished M.Phil thesis, University of Reading, 1982).
- [29.](#) Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History*, III. 433.
- [30.](#) Public Record Office, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills. 1729, No.633 and George Stephen, *Three Centuries of a City Library*, (Norwich 1917) 24-5.
- [31.](#) *A Catalogue of the Valuable Library Collected by that truly laborious Antiquary, Peter Le Neve, Esq.; Norroy King of Arms... Which will be sold by Auction the 22nd Day of February 1730-1 at the Bedford Coffee-house... By John Wilcox, Bookseller.*
- [32.](#) Fenn, *Memoirs*, 239.
- [33.](#) Letter from Thomas Tanner to Francis Blomefield 22 October 1733. N.R.O. Rye Ms.32 ff.10-11.
- [34.](#) Letter from Thomas Tanner to Richard Rawlinson 2 October 1735 (Bodleian Library Rawlinson Letters 30 fo.31).
- [35.](#) See note 32.
- [36.](#) Letter from Francis Blomefield to John Tanner, 2 January 1735/6 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 fo.65).
- [37.](#) Francis Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of Norfolk*, 5 vols. (Fersfield, Norwich, Lynn, 1739-75), I. Introduction.
- [38.](#) Letter from Francis Blomefield to Henry Briggs 4 January 1734/4 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 ff.28-9.
- [39.](#) Nichols, *Literary anecdotes*, IX., 419.
- [40.](#) *Bibliotheca Martiniana: a Catalogue of the Entire Library of the late eminent Antiquary Mr Thomas Martin... which will be sold ... by Martin Booth and John Berry*, [Norwich?, 1772]
- [41.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/1 includes a large envelope including a book cover entitled *Typographical Antiquities*. Within this are several hundred slips compiled by Martin and John Fenn of books missing from Ames's edition of this work (London: 1749) notes of which were apparently supplied to William Herbert in preparation for the second edition (3 vols. 1785-90). See also John Fenn's letters to Herbert (Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History*, V. 168-70.
- [42.](#) Blomefield's discovery of these letters was mentioned in a letter from him to Major Weldon (Sir William Paston's executor) 13 May 1735 (N.R.O. Rye Ms.32 fo.33). They do not however appear in either a receipt for manuscripts taken by Martin from Mrs Blomefield in September 1752 or else a list of manuscripts purchased from her in 1753 (both N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10), it is possible therefore that they may have been acquired by Martin before Bloemfield's death.
- [43.](#) Mary Muhl, 'A treatise of horsman shipp', *Time Literary Supplement*, 21 December 1967, 1245.
- [44.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/1/12 "Collections of political satirical amorous and miscellaneous verses of varying merit and length made by Peter Le Neve and Thomas Martin".
- [45.](#) For example he made purchases at Auditor Jett's auction, 1730, at Corbett's Auction February 1732, the Reverend Mr Pykarell's sale 1739, and Oswald's sale February 1740 (N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11).

[46.](#) These included Mr Marshall Woodbridge, 1745/6, Mr Glead Norwich 1741/2, Mr Jones Cockey Lane Norwich 1731 (who is not otherwise known as a bookseller), Fletcher Gyles London 1740, and various other unspecified booksellers in London and Winchester 1740 (N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11).

[47.](#) Lists of books purchased 1745 and 1720-1 respectively survive in N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11. In other cases it is not clear whether the purchases made were from members of the book trade or individuals.

[48.](#) Letter from Martin to Nehemiah Lodge April 1755 (N.R.O. Ms.453). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10 contains various priced lists of Blomefield's books and manuscripts including a list of purchases by Martin. Martin's and Charles Parkin's attempts at assisting Blomefield's widow are also recorded in letters between them N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/10, and in various memoranda, Bodl. Lib. Ms.Top.Gen.c102.

[49.](#) Letter to Andrew Ducarel July 10, 1765 (Nichols, *Literary anecdotes*, IX., 426.

[50.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[51.](#) Ibid.

[52.](#) These are: *A Catalogue of the Library of Mr Thomas Martin of Palgrave in Suffolk, lately deceased*, (Lynn, 1772) ESTC t098426, *A Catalogue of the Entire Collection of Prints, Coins, &c &c. Of the late Mr Martin F.A.S.* (See Note 14). *Bibliotheca Martiniana: a catalogue of the library of the late eminent antiquary Mr Thomas Martin, ... Which will be sold ...Saturday June 5, by Martin Booth and John Berry*, ([Norwich], 1773) ESTC t098426. *A catalogue of the very Curious, Valuable, and Numerous Collection of manuscripts of Thomas Martin ... which will be sold by Auction, by S. Baker and G. Leigh, ... on Wednesday, April 28, 1773, ...* [London, 1773], and *A catalogue of the Remaining Part of the Library of the Late Well known Antiquary Mr. Martin.... Which will be sold, by Auction, by S. Baker and G. Leigh, ... on Wednesday the 18th of May 1774, [London, 1774].*

[53.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[54.](#) Martin regularly used the services of Samuel Harper from about January 1743 until the mid 1750s, making two copies of each record of books, one of

[55.](#) Other binders used include Mr Reason, February 1738/9 (presumably W. Reason of London) and Mrs Watson, April 1742 [of Bury St Edmunds]. NNAS c3/2/11.

[56.](#) Fenn and Cullum both wrote memoirs of Martin (see note 2). Ives subscribed for an engraved plate, and Gough edited Martin's notes.

[57.](#) All of these men either corresponded with Martin or else are mentioned in his correspondence.

[58.](#) N.R.O. NNAS c3/1/5, and Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX., 416.

[59.](#) Nichols, *Illustrations of Literature*, V., 436.

[60.](#) See David Stoker, 'Mr Parkin's magpie, the other Mr Whittingham, and the fate of Great Yarmouth', *The Library*, 6th ser. XII, 1990, 121-31. Parkin also gave Martin a copy of his *An impartial account of the Invasion under William Duke of Normandy*, (London, 1756) which he had published "out of pure love of old England, and to animate us all against any French invasion" (N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/4).

[61.](#) Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 428, and a letter from Mackerell to Francis Blomefield 17 October 1735 (N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 fo.46).

[62.](#) Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 413-29.

[63.](#) *Vertue Note books*, V. (Oxford, 1938). Walpole Society Vol. 26, 119

[64.](#) Letter from Blomefield to Bell, 27.12.1734 N.R.O. Rye Ms. 32 f.28.

[65.](#) See note 2.

[66](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX., 420-1.

[67](#). N.R.O., NNAS c3/1/5.

[68](#). Fenn, *Memoirs*, 245, and John Chambers, *A general history of the county of Norfolk* (2 vols. Norwich 1829), II., 914.

[69](#). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/11.

[70](#). Fenn wrote 'An account of the disposal and total dispersion of Mr Martin's various collections' to accompany his 'Memoir', *Norfolk Archaeology*, XV., (1904) 249-66.

[71](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, VI. 439-41.

[72](#). Fenn, 'Memoirs', 245.

[73](#). Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, IX. 428-9.

[74](#). For a detailed (although not entirely complete) account of the sale, see Fenn, 'An account of the disposal...' 249-66.

[75](#). N.R.O. NNAS c3/2/12 'Mr Whittingham's appraisalment of Mr Thomas Martin's Library, 1771.' and *A catalogue of the library of Mr Thomas Martin of Palgrave in Suffolk, lately deceased*, (Lynn: W. Whittingham, 1772) ESTC t098426,

[76](#). *Proposals for printing by subscription the history of the town of Thetford, ... compiled from the papers of the late well-known antiquary, Mr Thomas Martin. By John Worth, F.A.S.*, [Norwich: John Crouse, 1774] (a copy is in the Norwich Public Library).

[77](#). Fenn's letters to Richard Gough regarding the purchase of the remaining materials from Hunt are published in Nichols, *Illustrations of the literary history*, V., 167-8.

[78](#). Most of this collection now constitutes the Frere Manuscripts, but other significant parts are preserved in the Duleep Singh collection and Norfolk and Norwich Antiquarian Society Manuscripts.

[79](#). Fenn, 'Memoirs' 248-9.

[80](#). Dibdin, *Bibliomania*, 384-6.

[**Return to list
of publications**](#)